

December 18, 2016

'My Home is a Memory

By Vandana Kalra

In a year marked by migration and displacement, artists at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016 frame the idea of home and away.



The house that built me: A detail from Salman Toor's diptych *For Allen Ginsberg*, inspired by Hasan Mujtaba's poem by the same name.

Salman Toor and Hasan Mujtaba, New York, *The Revelation Project*

It is their distanced view of home and their shared struggles and romances in New York that brought Pakistani poet Hasan Mujtaba and artist Salman Toor together for this collaboration. Introduced to the poet at a party in New York last year, Toor invited Mujtaba to his Brooklyn studio and asked him to recite his poem, *For Allen Ginsberg*. "Its commitment to resist conservative religious ideas, nationalism and the connections it drew between seemingly unrelated places, struck me. I knew I wanted to paint an image based on the poem," says Toor. The result is a display in Kochi in which Toor borrows elements from pop culture to capture on his canvas the streets of Pakistan, the writings on its walls and the suffering of its people. "In my dreams, I go back to my country of origin, Sindh. I wish I could go, but I can't," says Mujtaba, who worked in Pakistan when the regime of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq came down heavily on the arts.

Toor, who also has a studio in Lahore, adds, "Being an immigrant is probably not the same for both of us. In my situation, it forces me to look both critically and sentimentally at the culture in Pakistan, to select parts of the

cultures of my home country and my host country to create a hybrid culture. But it also causes disruptions and cognitive dissonance, a debilitating theme which is personified by the one-legged itinerant beggar in many of my paintings. That's me."

Sirous Namazi, Sweden, Twelve Thirty

Sirous Namazi was eight in 1978 when his family home in Shiraz, Iran, was plundered by Islamic fundamentalists as they went about attacking members of the Baha'i faith. After weeks in hiding, the family found refuge in Sweden. As they went about making a new home in Sweden, Namazi could never let go of memories of his childhood home. It is that home he has recreated in a room in the gallery in Kochi from the recollections of his parents and siblings, his memories and photographs that the family carried with them when they left behind their old life. Six metal chairs, steps leading to the courtyard, a white refrigerator and a large black-and-white carpet lies at the centre of the re-imagined interiors. A video that plays in the room describes the calm before their expulsion and the process of recreation. It takes forward the artist's engagement with his past, including his 2002 sculpture *Periphery*, where Namazi recreated a typical balcony in an immigrant suburb in Sweden. Through *Twelve Thirty*, he makes the point that however tight you hold on to your recollections, they get dusty with time.



Abir Karmakar, India, Home

The Baroda-based artist recreates the ancestral home of a Bhuj family in an old Portuguese bungalow in the bylanes of Fort Kochi. The entry point is a canvas depicting the drawing room, with an inviting sofa and curtains drawn behind. Inside is the kitchen, its shelves lined with utensils and Milton casseroles. The bedrooms are crammed, with suitcases stacked above metal cupboards. Through his photo-realist canvases, Karmakar depicts the desire to remain close to one's roots. "We move several states, even continents, but there is this constant effort to retain one's culture. There is an attempt to assimilate in order to fit in, but one does not want to forget where one comes from. We feel confined, trapped in this duality," says Karmakar. The 39-year-old dips into his personal history too — his grandfather migrated from Chittagong to Lucknow to Siliguri, where Karmakar was born. Now, he has built a home for himself in Baroda. "This is where my son was born. I don't know where he will settle though."



Ales Steger, Slovenia, The Pyramid of Exiled Poets

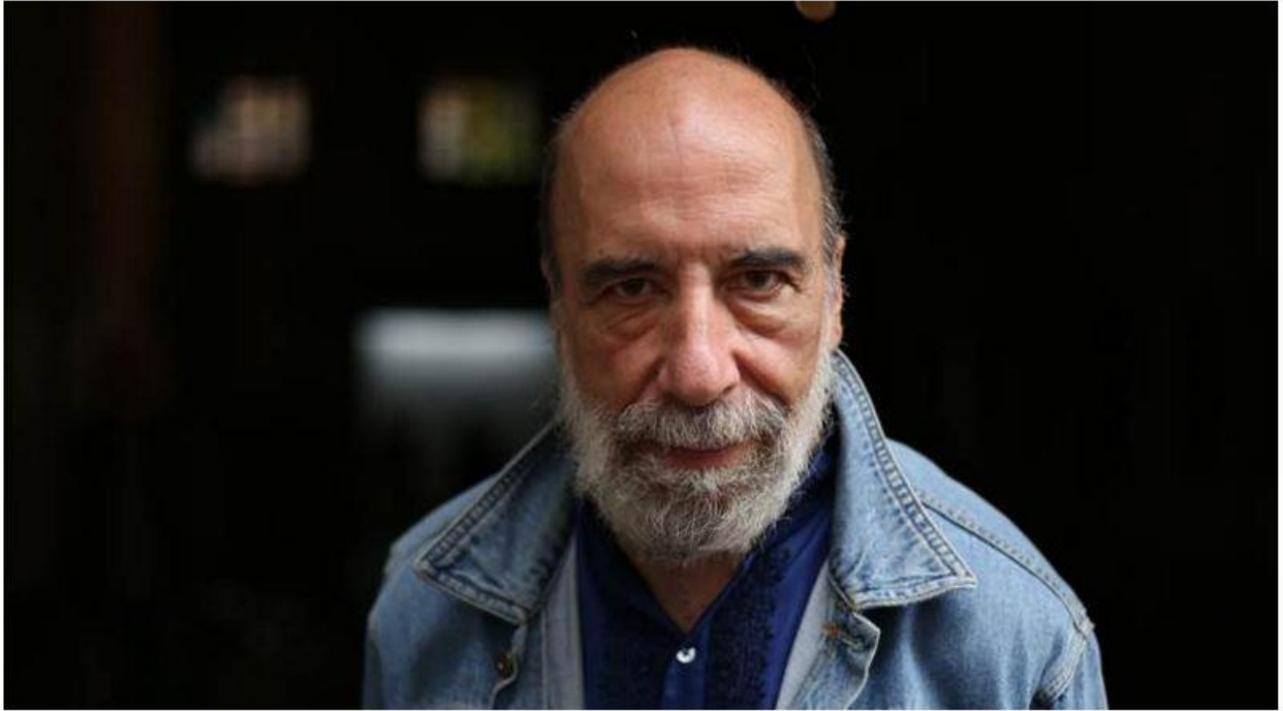
The Slovenian poet goes back 2,400 years, referencing Plato's famous work *Polititeria*, where he argued for the expulsion of poets. Steger feels the standpoint has been "an inspiration for one of the least-known exoduses in human history". His installation at Aspinwall is a pyramid dedicated to poets banished from the Western world, forced to live in exile. The structure is built in recognition of their hardships. "Through different times and cultures, pyramids served as a landmark of political power. It was in pyramids that pharaohs, rulers and dictators were buried in hope for timeless glory," says Steger. However, unlike the opulent historic pyramids, the poet builds his with cow dung, with dimly-lit passageways in its interiors that echo with verses from the works of 10 exiled poets — from Roman poet Ovid who was sent into exile by Augustus, to Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's *Who Am I, Without Exile*, German dramatist Bertolt Brecht's *On the Term of Exile* and Irish writer James Joyce's *Of That so Sweet Imprisonment*.

Katarina Zdjelar, Netherlands, The Perfect Sound

Language IS one of the many facets of cultural assimilation. And the Serbia-born artist addresses the complex issue of language and identity in her single-channel video, *The Perfect Sound*, in which a speech therapist in Birmingham is seen helping an immigrant shed his accent. The man constantly chants monosyllables, which the young man mimics. Through the video, Zdjelar critiques how language, which is an indicator of a person's social and geographical background, sometimes divides people and becomes a medium that homogenises.

Anand, India, Map Makers And Map Breakers: Space-to-Time Along the Maps

"It is all about maps and borders. The invader crosses the border to enlarge the map, the revolutionary re-paints the map, the exile is forced to abandon all maps and the nomad has never known the map," writes Malayalam littérateur P Sachidanandan, better known as Anand, in a book that accompanies his installation at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. The sculptures, which are a part of this installation, were made in the 1970s and 1980s when he was posted in West Bengal. Anand used the soil left behind by earthworms to make their burrows and moulded them to create this series of works, being exhibited publicly for the first time. "I studied the earthworms in my courtyard and started doing these works. The earthworms were my teachers," says Anand. He writes about his childhood in Kerala, his first big-city experience in Bombay, the repeated partitions of the subcontinent and the plight of refugees. "A refugee only knows where he is running from, not where he is running to," says the author.



Raul Zurita, Chile, The Sea of Pain

Chilean poet Raul Zurita is known for his experiments — writing his poem *La Vida Nueva* (The New Life) across the New York City sky in 1982, and inscribing *Ni pena ni miedo* (No shame no fear) in the Desert of Atacama with a bulldozer in 1993. In Kochi, the Chilean National Prize winner is asking people to walk in the “Sea of Pain”, a room filled with shallow seawater where canvases on the walls pose questions. If in one, he asks, “Do you Listen? Don’t you/ In the sea of pain”, another reads, “Never, Never, Never/ In the sea of Pain”. Wading through the waters, the viewers reach the end: this is where Zurita has his dedication to five-year-old Syrian boy Galip Kurdi, who, along with his mother and brother Aylan Kurdi, drowned while trying to enter Europe. The 66-year-old poet-author says, “This is a poem about pain and love that refers to the Syrian immigrants and thousands of victims who were not photographed. There is more unseen than what is seen, because there is a lot that we do not want to see. These are troubled times.”